

Climate change in Italy: Towards the politicization of an issue

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Abstract

Climate change has emerged as a critical global challenge, recognized for its significant impact on the environment and societies worldwide. Nonetheless, for a long time, the Italian political system has devoted limited attention to climate change issues. Within such a framework, this article aims to answer the main research question addressed in the contributions of this special issue: is the politicization of climate change taking place in contemporary Italy? We answer this question by analyzing the three dimensions of politicization – salience, actors' expansion, and polarization – in light of the contributions to the special issue. These studies investigate whether climate change is becoming a politicized issue by analyzing Italian parties, media, social movements, interest groups, and public opinion. Overall, the findings suggest that we are observing a partial politicization of the climate change issue in Italy. Indeed, there is evidence of an increase in salience over time in the spheres analyzed and an expansion of actors involved. Also, there are some signals of polarization, and consistent with previous research, the climate change issue largely appears positional. Nonetheless, the number of protests has substantially decreased in comparison with 2019, the approach of some actors tends to depoliticize the issue, and patterns of polarization are not unanimously detected.

1. Introduction

Given its growing impact on both the environment and societies, climate change has emerged as one of the most urgent global crises that the world must address. The scientific community agrees on the existence and severity of climate change, with numerous studies confirming the rise in global temperatures caused by human activity and the acceleration of extreme weather events (IPCC 2022). Consequently, after years of debate around climate change mitigation dominated by science, market mechanisms, technical solutions and, in general, a de-politicized understanding of it (Swyngedouw 2011), climate issues have gradually gained prominence also in political and public debates. Alongside their salience, the level of polarization on climate action has also increased (Marquardt and Lederer 2022).

Against this backdrop, the Italian political system long exhibited a notable lack of attention to climate change issues, both at the political level and within public discourse and socio-political research. Italy lacked a strong Green party, and mainstream parties, with few exceptions, did not invest significantly in topics like the environment and climate change when competing for election. When the media confronted this issue, they discussed it substantially less than in other European countries. At the same time, and

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due to the lack of salience among the media and political elites, the issue was not particularly prominent in Italian public opinion (Biancalana and Ladini 2022).

However, a series of events in recent years may have impinged upon the perception of climate change and its role in public discourse, increasing its salience and making it more polarized. Extreme weather events like the floods that took place in Marche, Emilia-Romagna, and Tuscany between 2022 and 2023, the approval of the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (National Recovery and Resilience Plan, PNRR) funded by the Next Generation EU program – whose second mission deals with the green revolution and ecological transition – and the emergence of new and widely-supported social movements like Fridays for Future, may have influenced the context of the climate change debate, opening up spaces for greater awareness and action. Relatedly, how to address the climate crisis was among the issues discussed in 2024 Italian electoral campaign to renew the European Parliament (EP).

At the European Union (EU) level, this election showed a significant setback for the parliamentary group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA), who retrenched from 72 to 54 Members of the EP (MEPs) mainly due to the vote losses of German and French contributors to the Greens EP group (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen and Les Écologistes – Europe Écologie Les Verts). In contrast, the Italian electoral list Alleanza Verdi Sinistra, including the green party Europa Verde and Sinistra Italiana performed rather well, obtaining 6.8% of the votes in a context of low participation (the turnout was 48.3%). Thanks to this result, which was probably driven by civil liberties issues due to the candidacy of Ilaria Salis¹, the number of Italian MEPs attached to the Greens/EFA (3) remained unchanged compared to the previous EP legislature.

What is important to emphasize for the purpose of this special issue is that, compared to the past, all electoral manifestos for the 2024 EP elections mentioned climate issues and did not question the existence of climate change. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the positions taken by parties on this issue aligned with their left-right ideological stance. On one side, Italian right-wing parties in government campaigned for a revision of the EU Green Deal, the plan by which the EU set the goal to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia linked the issue of climate change to the protection of the agricultural sector and promised to radically change the "greenhouse" directive of the EU ban on the production of petrol and diesel cars from 2035. Similarly, also the Lega of Matteo Salvini campaigned for a significant revision of the EU Green Deal, while Forza Italia maintained a more nuanced position, asking for more realistic and non-ideologically-driven green policies to protect the industrial sector. On the other side, opposition parties of the left – Partito Democratico, Movimento 5 Stelle, and Alleanza Verdi Sinistra – explicitly defended the Green Deal and called for the adoption of even more ambitious climate action and goals².

In light of this, the special issue aims to investigate whether an environmental divide capable of (re-)structuring Italian politics is emerging. Is politicization – the process through which issues are framed as controversial topics and become subjects of political

¹ Ilaria Salis is an Italian activist arrested in Budapest in February 2023 on charges of assaulting neo-Nazi activists. In the 2024 European elections Salis was elected, thus gaining release and parliamentary immunity.

² For a first analysis on the climate change issues in the electoral manifestos see <https://eccoclimate.org/it/elezioni-europee-clima-e-energia-nei-programmi-elettorali/> (last access on June 24, 2024).

confrontation among parties and citizens – taking place on climate change? How do political parties and voters approach climate change and the green transition? What is the role played by new environmental social movements, and what are their repertoires of action? Has the media coverage of climate change evolved? Do policy proposals for a green and just transition reinforce existing divides or create new conflicts? Is climate change related to voting behavior?

Answering these questions is particularly relevant because Italy has been facing significant challenges regarding climate change³. Data from Legambiente show a growing incidence of extreme weather events in our country. Nevertheless, the Italian political framework presents significant gaps, such as the absence of a comprehensive climate law and delay in adopting a climate change adaptation plan, approved only in December 2023. These factors highlight the need for an in-depth analysis of Italian politics and society on climate change, not only to understand the dynamics, but also to identify the opportunities and challenges in addressing it.

This introductory article is structured as follows. After providing a definition of politicization, the next section introduces the contributions included in this collection. The definition will be adopted in the third section to interpret the results of single papers and to provide an overall picture. The final section concludes by highlighting limitations and future research avenues.

2. Why and how to study the politicization of climate change in Italy

As anticipated, in this special issue we aim to address a central question that has yet to find an answer in the existing literature: is politicization taking place with respect to climate change issues in Italy? This question will guide the articles featured in this collection.

Politicization, in general, refers to the process of bringing an issue into the political sphere, involving decision making and conflict over differing views on potential solutions (De Wilde and Zürn 2012). Although various definitions exist, the literature generally agrees on three key dimensions: the salience of the issue, meaning its importance and visibility in public debate, the expansion of actors involved in the issue, and the polarization of actors with differing orientations on the issue, i.e., the increase in distance between their positions. When all three dimensions are present, we can assert that an issue is politicized. However, it can also happen that only some of these analytical components are present, resulting in partial or moderate politicization (Kriesi 2016).

We can also investigate if the issue is undergoing depoliticization, for instance by being relegated to the realm of scientific expertise or fate. Depoliticization is understood as “the process of removing the political character of decision-making processes” (Burnham 2001, 128). This involves closing down debates and avoiding controversies, often by promoting the idea that “there is no alternative” to professionalization, technocratization, or delegation to agencies (Feindt, Schwindenhammer and Tosun 2021, 5).

³ See for instance: <https://www.legambiente.it/comunicati-stampa/2023-anno-da-bollino-rosso-per-il-clima/> (Accessed on the 29th of August 2024)

Using Italy as a case study, this special issue explores how social and political scientists approach the politics of climate change in Italy, focusing on the dynamics of politicization and depoliticization. To achieve this, the special issue covers a wide range of approaches and methods. It gathers eight articles on the politics of climate change in Italy, incorporating original evidence from multiple actors, including political parties (Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi 2023; Cotta et al. 2023; Padoan 2023), social movements (Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata 2023), interest groups (Arrigoni 2023), the media (Imperatore and Frazzetta 2023) and public opinion (Bordignon et al. 2023; Cabeza, Ronchi and Sallabera 2023). We believe that an integrated approach, both in terms of actors and methods, will provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, as certain research questions can be more effectively addressed from multiple perspectives.

Furthermore, besides the issue of politicization or depoliticization, we are interested in how the context of multiple crises has influenced climate change issues. For instance, contributions also explore how other crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the energy crisis, have impacted the discourse and actions related to climate change.

In this special issue readers will encounter various actors. First, we address the role and position of political parties. In this respect, we consider both the national party system (e.g., Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi's article analyzes the evolution of party platforms on energy, and Padoan examines the evolution of environmental positions within the Movimento 5 Stelle) and the European level (Cotta and colleagues discuss the vote for the Social Climate Fund in the European Parliament). Secondly, regarding social movements, Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata's article examines the new wave of climate mobilization that took place in Italy following Greta Thunberg's strikes. Additionally, we tackle topics that are less explored in the literature, such as the role of intermediate actors like organized philanthropy in the strategic depoliticization of climate issues (see Arrigoni's article).

The special issue also covers the demand side (see Cabeza, Ronchi and Sallabera's article), focusing on public opinion and attitudes towards climate policies, and includes a paper on the propensity to vote for green parties (Bordignon and colleagues). Finally, all these discussions occur within a public sphere where the debate on these issues is evolving. On this topic, readers will find a paper analyzing how the media has covered extreme climate events and the issue of climate change in general (see Imperatore and Frazzetta's article).

3. Towards the politicization of a controversial issue?

What can the evidence gathered in this special issue tell us about the politicization of climate change issues in Italy? In the following paragraphs, we will do this by analyzing the three dimensions of politicization separately: salience, actor expansion, and polarization.

3.1. Salience

The first dimension of the concept of politicization is salience. We can refer to salience as the political importance of issues (Burden and Sanberg 2003), or the measure of how important a given issue is from the viewpoint of members of a given social unit

(Oehl, Schaffer and Bernauer 2017). Salience can pertain to public opinion, media, and political parties.

Three points warrant attention with respect to salience. First, the fact that an issue is visible, discussed, present on the public opinion agenda, and considered important in public debate, civil society, or the political system, is a *precondition* for its politicization. For instance, it has been demonstrated that a higher salience of climate policy is associated with a more contested debate on the issue (Oehl, Schaffer and Bernauer 2017), and that the polarization on energy and environmental issues and the salience of these issues, both at the mass and elite levels, tends to go hand in hand (Lüth and Schaffer 2022).

Second, the various actors discussed in this special issue – parties, movements, citizens, and the media – are *interconnected* in the dynamics of salience. Previous research has shown that a variation in elite cues and social movement efforts impact media attention which, in turn, influences public attitudes toward climate change (Carmichael and Brulle 2017). Similarly, the salience of environmental issues among the public and the pressure from the movements for climate justice were found to positively influence the emphasis that political parties place on it (Schwörer 2024; Spoon, Hobolt and De Vries 2014).

Third, salience can be driven by *events*. As anticipated, in recent years certain events in Italy may have potentially increased the salience of climate change issues. The growing global relevance of climate change, coupled with the approval of international agreements aimed at mitigating its effects, including the ratification of the European Green Deal (2019) and the Social Climate Fund (see Cotta and colleagues' article), the enactment of the PNRR and the energy crisis (see Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi), along with the increasing number of extreme climate events (see Imperatore and Frazzetta), might have caused a shift in salience. Additionally, the new wave of mobilizations led by figures such as Greta Thunberg (see Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata) has also played a significant role.

What do we know about the salience of the issue in Italy? In their literature review article, Biancalana and Ladini (2022) indicate that the issue has long been, until very recent years, of low salience for the media, political parties, and public opinion in our country. Against this backdrop, what do the articles in this special issue tell us about the dynamics of the salience of climate change issues in Italy? The articles cover various actors and themes, by particularly focusing on the role of extreme weather events, mobilizations, and the energy crisis.

Extreme weather events can impact the salience of the issue. Not only can the experience of an extreme weather event help reduce the spatial and temporal distance from the consequences of climate change, leading to greater willingness to support policies (Spence et al. 2011; Demski et al. 2017), but such events are also highly appealing to the media, which tend to cover them extensively (Djerf-Pierre 2012; Schmidt, Ivanova and Schäfer 2013). In turn, media coverage can prompt politicians to take positions on the issue. However, for this to happen, the media must establish a link between extreme weather events and climate change.

In the contribution by Imperatore and Frazzetta (2023), we see that the discourse surrounding two extreme weather events (the floods in Marche and Emilia-Romagna) witnessed an unprecedented inclusion of climate change, while in the past, when

discussing extreme events, the Italian media referred not to climate change but to apocalyptic scenarios. A study by the Osservatorio di Pavia indicates that, among the 522 news reports on extreme weather events broadcast by Italian TV news between July and August 2022, only 24% made an explicit connection to climate change, and often the cause-effect relationship was only hinted at (Azzalini and Marchese 2023). However, there are signs of change. The findings of Imperatore and Frazzetta's article suggest increased media coverage of extreme weather events and a shift in the narrative paradigm regarding global warming, compared to similar events that occurred in the past.

The two authors also suggest that the cycle of climate protests may have influenced the level of media attention to extreme weather events, a hypothesis that needs further research to verify. Although we do not have direct evidence in this regard, we can say, together with Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata (2023: 257), that "the years since 2018 have seen an unprecedented wave of mobilization around climate change in Europe". The emergence of this new wave of climate mobilizations in 2019, following Greta Thunberg's school strikes, represented a significant step forward also for the history of the Italian climate movement, and have undoubtedly increased the salience of the issue. It is also particularly relevant to note that Zamponi and colleagues' article highlights that most of the criteria used by groups to choose their repertoires of action are based on the media relevance of the protest.

The level of salience of the climate change issue can be observed from the number of protests reported by the media. Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata's article analyzes protest events from 2018 to 2023. The period indeed seems to be characterized by heightened conflict, with an average of 12.5 protest events per month during the period considered. However, the distribution of protest events across time on a monthly basis shows three distinct phases: first, a massive eruption of collective action, between March 2019 and January 2020, corresponding to the first global climate strikes organized under the label "Fridays For Future"; then the pandemic, with low levels of mobilization, from February 2020 to February 2021; finally, a renewed phase of post-pandemic contention, characterized by smaller peaks but also by the persistent presence of climate-related protest.

While the pandemic contributed to a decrease in the salience of environmental and climate change issues, it is worth analyzing the impact of another crisis: that of energy, which began in 2022 following the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, this crisis could potentially foster the development of new climate and energy policies in Europe (Steffen and Patt 2022; Natili and Visconti 2023). On the other hand, it could be seen as a potential obstacle in the fight against climate change, with the risk of neglecting ecological transition, for example, by emphasizing the use of fossil fuels during the emergency (Zakeri et al. 2022; Biancalana and Loreti 2024).

In this regard, Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi (2023) analyze the 2022 election manifestos and indicate an overall increase in the relevance given to the energy issue compared to the past. Furthermore, on the left, the framing of energy issues has increasingly shifted towards sustainability, which becomes a more frequently used frame, indirectly indicating greater salience of the climate change issue. This does not come as a surprise, and as we will see in the section on polarization, there is a left-right divide both in public opinion and within parties, with the left more inclined than the right to take ownership of the issue (Lakoff 2010, McCright et al. 2016).

But what space would there be for a party prioritizing sustainability and environmental protection in the Italian political system? Would it be limited to the left-wing area? Indirectly, this is also a measure of salience. Bordignon and colleagues (2023) ask a sample of the Italian population about the likelihood of supporting a hypothetical political party that prioritizes sustainability and environmental protection in its agenda. Despite the potential shortcomings of the measure, which could overestimate the green vote, the size of the Propensity for Green Voting (PGV) area is large and intersects the potential electorate of all parties, including non-voters.

It seems, therefore, that the issue is becoming more and more salient among parties, voters, and in the public debate in Italy.

3.2. Actor expansion

The second dimension characterizing the politicization of an issue is actor expansion. The process of politicization requires not only an increase in the salience of an issue but also that political entrepreneurs invest in it by acting as polarizing agents capable of mobilizing interests and voters along social and cultural divides. This would imply an increase in actors – including individual citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, interest groups, and governmental bodies – who contribute to public contestation. Furthermore, actor expansion should be understood not only as the inclusion in public debates of new participants alongside traditionally dominant actors but also as “audience expansion”, reflected in public opinion figures (Hutter and Ker-scher 2016) and in attempts to engage “inactive” actors.

As they increasingly entail broader socio-economic consequences and transformations, discourses and policies relating to climate change have, in the last decade, left the exclusive realm of the expert community and niche parties, and are beginning to be shaped by a wider range of actors (Marquardt and Lederer 2022). Discussions on climate change have attracted the attention of a growing number of new and old political actors at the local, national, and international levels, making it a more prominent arena of public conflict (Hulme 2009; Ćetković and Hagemann 2020; Marquardt and Lederer 2022). On one side, along with traditional left and green parties and associations, the emergence of social movements like climate justice groups, Fridays for Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR) initiated a struggle for the introduction of just and fair mitigation policies through protests, disruptive action, and demands for systemic change (Marquardt 2020). On the other side (and in reaction to this), radical right political actors started to challenge the narrative of climate change as a global challenge (Marquardt and Lederer 2022). Leaders like Donald Trump in the United States, Duterte in the Philippines, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Milei in Argentina, as well as parties that experienced electoral success in the 2024 EP elections like the Rassemblement National in France, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria all embraced positions ranging from questioning anthropogenic climate change to the rejection of the Green Deal and other policy mitigation strategies.

Contributions in this special issue help us to understand whether the Italian political arena has experienced an expansion of political actors participating in public contestations on climate change and its related consequences and policies. Looking at organized interests, the articles of Arrigoni (2023), and Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata

(2023) emphasize an increasing political role played by organized philanthropy and social movements on climate issues, but with contrasting practices of politicization and depoliticization.

Regarding social movements, we know that in the last two decades traditional actors that “owned the issue” like Legambiente, WWF Italia, and Italia Nostra, have lost their centrality in favor of more informal groups, like citizens’ committees and social centers involved in Locally Unwanted Land Use (LULU) campaigns (Andretta and Imperatore 2023). In their article, Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata, through a mixed-methods design combining Protest Event Analysis (PEA) and interviews with climate activists, identify FFF, XR, and Ultima Generazione (UG) as the main political actors of Italian climate protests. Alongside these groups, they noted the presence of a plurality of other actors not primarily focusing on ecological claims, such as student organizations, parties, social centers and other movement groups. They often join strikes and demonstrations, proving an expansion of actors (with different levels of institutionalization) interested in climate change issues.

A complementary component of actor expansion consists in the broadening of protest recipients. Zamponi, Ferro and Cugnata show that in Italy in the pre-COVID phase, the main targets of social movements’ actions were government institutions and the public at large, with attempts to expand the audience through global strikes. During the 2022 electoral campaign to renew the Italian parliament, mainstream political parties also became the target of protests. Private interests have been targeted as well, with a particular focus on fossil fuel companies like *ENI*. Instead, while the media have been used by activists to gauge the efficacy of their repertoire of action, they have not been explicitly targeted. Based on the results of their protests and their ability to expand the debate on climate change, the new organizations have also re-articulated their actions in an attempt to become more effective in enhancing their environmental stances. They have also started a discussion on the merits of conventional participation, envisaging the potential institutionalization of Italian green social movements.

While these actors, particularly the new movements like FFF, XR, and UG, have adopted a “critical debate perspective” focusing on the politicization of climate change to revive democratic debate and contestation on sustainable futures by linking it to issues of justice, societal struggles, and political order (Pepermans and Maesele 2016), the spread to other actors may have been constrained by efforts to actively depoliticize environmental issues through the adoption of science-based trajectories and technological solutions (Marquardt and Lederer 2022). In her contribution, Arrigoni focuses on the depoliticizing role played by climate-related networks of Italian organized philanthropy, i.e., foundations or associations that make strategic use of their financial assets for the public good. Philanthropic organizations have grown significantly in recent decades and have become increasingly involved in shaping discourses and policies to combat climate change. For instance, they acted as key allies and intermediaries between the government and civil society during the 2015 Paris Agreement and were able to influence its outcome by emphasizing specific discourses and strategies like sustainable development, green economy and the belief that the market can solve the climate crisis (Morena 2016).

Based on an analysis of official documents and interviews with representatives of Italian climate networks, Arrigoni scrutinizes the role of the four main networks of Italian foundations (Asvis, Itasif, Assifero and F-20), to show how they have contributed to shifting decision-making responsibility to non-political actors. The discursive depoliticization of public action on climate change has developed in parallel to the politicization of philanthropic networks. They act as policy entrepreneurs promoting specific policy solutions and as field-builders, mobilizing to construct discourses that permeate the institutional policy environment. These networks and associations take on a political role by commissioning studies on climate policymaking and by disseminating them to leading political and economic actors. Like their international counterparts, Italian networks support a techno-optimist paradigm to green transition that tends to depoliticize the issues at stake and reinforce the role of private actors and financial instruments. Therefore, the political actions of movements such as FFF, XR, or UG risk being stifled by this contrasting dynamic.

Lastly, this special issue informs us about actor expansion concerning political supply. We know that Green parties and issues have always played a marginal role in the Italian political arena. The main Green party, the former Federazione dei Verdi now Europa Verde, was established in the early 1990s and always scored about three per cent of the votes in national legislative elections. However, in the last EP elections Greens joined forces with another party (Sinistra Italiana) and formed the Alleanza Verdi Sinistra federation. Alleanza Verdi Sinistra obtained slightly less than seven per cent of the votes, roughly the sum of the share of votes for the two parties: a result that does not testify to an “electoral green turn”. More interesting changes are those related to mainstream political parties that in the past did not consider environmental issues worth electoral investment (Biancalana and Ladini 2022). As discussed above, all major parties mentioned green issues in their electoral manifesto for the 2024 EP elections, signaling attempts to mobilize the electorate on climate change and, therefore, actors’ expansion.

Previously, the only major party that, albeit for a short time span, represented environmental issues in the Italian political system is the Movimento 5 Stelle. At its origins, this party was characterized by an environmentalist agenda (Mosca and Tronconi 2021), and its emergence has been linked to environmentalist movements (Biancalana 2020). Padoan’s article focuses on the evolution of the discourses and practices of the Movimento 5 Stelle on environmental issues. Using a mixed method design (analyzing manifestos, official documents, and interviews), Padoan evaluates the Movimento 5 Stelle’s environmental trajectory and whether it can be considered a “true” green party. Findings confirm that environmental protection was a key value for the Movimento 5 Stelle in shaping its original identity and gathering the first core of party members. However, over time the party undertook a process of institutionalization (Tronconi 2018) and moderation during its period in power (Biancalana 2020) and forgot about its green origins. Consistently, Padoan shows that environmentalism was not the reason behind the electoral success of the Movimento 5 Stelle, which was due instead to its anti-system/populist agenda. Thus it cannot be considered as belonging to the Green party family.

Still, concerning actors’ expansion at the institutional level, it is worth noting that the Movimento 5 Stelle decision to join the technocratic Draghi government was

justified by party leaders also as the opportunity to create a Ministry for Ecological Transition as a replacement for the previous Ministry of the Environment⁴. This is a rhetorical innovation useful to the Movimento 5 Stelle leadership, to “justify” to the party base, participation in a technocratic government coalition with mainstream parties. It was no coincidence that, before the government confidence vote in February 2021, Mario Draghi dedicated a relatively large part of his speech to discussing climate change, global warming, and the green transition⁵.

On the whole, the empirical evidence collected in the papers supports the idea that a growing number of new (especially social movements) and old actors (organized philanthropy and parties) are engaging with public action and discussions on the environment and climate change, to politicize (in the case of FFF and XR) or (in organized philanthropy) to de-politicize it.

3.3. Polarization

The third dimension of the politicization of an issue is polarization. Polarization of an issue consists of divergent positions among parties, media, and the public. Following Di Maggio, Evans and Bryson (1996, 693), polarization can be defined as “both a state and a process”. Thus, it is crucial to highlight the two meanings of polarization, namely societies (as well as media and party systems) that are polarized and societies (as well as media and party systems) that are polarizing over an issue. For instance, in the US context, we can talk about the polarization of climate change both in terms of a state and a process (Egan and Mullin 2017).

Regarding the Italian case, recent research shows that parties employ different frames when referring to environmental issues and citizens’ attitudes toward climate change and that such frames vary by political orientation (Bertolotti and Catellani 2023; Biancalana and Ladini 2024). Nonetheless, at the public opinion level, there is no clear evidence of an increasing gap in climate attitudes between people holding different political orientations (Biancalana and Ladini 2024). Of course, it becomes hard to investigate the process of polarization among the public, given the rare availability of repeated measures on climate change attitudes in national and international surveys. Moreover, the absence of measurement of climate issues in projects like the Comparative Manifesto Project (Farstad 2018; Schworer 2024) is a barrier to research aimed at exploring the dynamics of climate change issues in the party system.

Several articles in the special issue provide original and updated evidence on the possible polarization of climate change in Italy. In this regard, what conclusions can we derive by integrating multiple pieces of evidence? First of all, we should acknowledge that, with the exception of Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi’s contribution, the articles on the issue of polarization are more focused on the idea of polarization as a state rather than a process. The empirical evidence reported in the special issue offers limited signals of polarization, as not all the findings point into such a direction.

⁴ See for instance: www.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-m5s-caos-governisti-sperano-un-segnale-draghi-far-vincere-si-ADQ1K6IB (Accessed on the 11th of June 2024).

⁵ See for instance: Il discorso di Draghi al Senato: Ha preceduto il dibattito e il voto sulla fiducia, che sarà votata da quasi tutti i partiti. *Il Post*, 17th February 2021: www.ilpost.it/2021/02/17/draghi-discorso-fiducia-senato/ (accessed on the 11th of June 2024).

Bordignon and colleagues (2023) indeed show that the electoral potential of a hypothetical party focusing on environmental protection and sustainability cross cuts party preferences. Although the electoral demand is stronger among supporters of center-left parties (especially Alleanza Verdi Sinistra and Movimento 5 Stelle), the authors show that the green electoral demand finds a fragmented representation, partially including also supporters of right-wing parties. These results could suggest high consensus toward environmental issues and, accordingly, low polarization. Nonetheless, such consensus could depend on the frame employed by the authors in presenting the hypothetical green parties. Indeed, environmental protection tends to be intended as a valence issue, and even far-right parties often promote it (Forchtner and Lubarda 2023). Moreover, when referring to environmental issues the frame of environmental protection is relatively more common among right-wing parties also in Italy (Biancalana and Ladini 2024).

Nonetheless, several studies argue that climate change should be intended as a positional issue since it implies “the combination of the fundamental restructuring of the economy and human behavior together with the altruistic imperative” (Farstad 2018, 699). Indeed, right-wing parties tend not to promote actions for the mitigation of climate change, as argued in the previous section. Therefore, while Bordignon and colleagues’ results indicate that there is significant potential demand for green parties among the Italian electorate, this does not necessarily mean that there is cross-cutting demand for a party prioritizing climate change and its mitigation. Moreover, as the climate change question is becoming more and more crucial among environmental issues, the latter are gradually shifting from valence to positional issues. Padoan’s (2023) article contributes to this literature, by reporting the change in the narrative of the environmental discourse of the Movimento 5 Stelle, from valence to positional issues.

Climate change issues can be considered positional also because the ecological transition, devised in order to mitigate its effects, does not come without costs, and has consequences at the economic and societal levels. Therefore, policymakers may design compensatory instruments for supporting those categories of people bearing the costs of decarbonization (Gaikwad, Genovese and Tingley 2022). Within the broader program of the European Green Deal, the Social Climate Fund, approved by the European Parliament in the spring of 2023, goes in this direction. By analyzing Italian MEP votes for the Social Climate Fund, Cotta and colleagues (2023) report high consensus among Italian parties, even among Lega and Fratelli d’Italia, contrary to the authors’ expectations. The votes did not strictly pertain to climate policies, but rather compensation measures for vulnerable people. Given that the process of ecological transition is ongoing, even parties not supporting the ecological transition supported those social measures. The authors indeed suggest the possible existence of a social coalition on the ecological transition.

Moreover, previous research analyzing politicians’ speeches in the Italian parliament (2013-2018, Ghinoi and Steiner 2020) and the Emilia-Romagna regional council (2014-2020, Ghinoi, De Vita and Silvestri 2023) argues that large coalitions can emerge on the climate change issue. Nonetheless, Cotta and colleagues report divergence – between center-left parties, including Movimento 5 Stelle, and other parties – in the voting patterns on amendments strictly concerning climate policies, such as linking economic support for countries and small enterprises with more ambiguous targets on the ecological transition, such as reducing carbon emissions.

When we look at the dynamics of party competition over the energy issue, polarization on climate change – both as a state and a process – emerges. By analyzing Italian parties' manifestos in the period 2018-2022, Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi (2023) argue that political parties employed different frames, and that these frames have changed over time, especially after the beginning of the Ukrainian war and the consequent energy crisis. Parties' positions on energy issues show a left-right alignment. In 2022, the authors show that Alleanza Verdi Sinistra, Movimento 5 Stelle, and the Partito Democratico adopted a sustainability frame when referring to the energetic transition, Forza Italia an eco-modernist frame, while Lega and Fratelli d'Italia an eco-nationalist one. As regards the process of polarization, Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi point out that the Partito Democratico has moved over time from an eco-modernist position to a sustainability one, and a similar dynamic was observed for the Movimento 5 Stelle. Nonetheless, the analysis suggests that no party explicitly opposed the energy and ecological transition in the party manifesto: thus, there are no explicit signs of climate change denial.

While Campolongo, Citroni and Tarditi point out that external shocks such as the Ukrainian war can impact on party polarization over energy transition, Imperatore and Frazzetta (2023) focus on the impact of extreme weather events as a driver of the polarization of climate change. Their article reports signs of polarization of the climate change issue on occasion of the floods that hit the Marche and Emilia-Romagna regions respectively in September 2022 – during the national electoral campaign – and May 2023. By looking at the media system, they analyze how different newspapers employed different frames in representing the floods. By analyzing articles on the floods appearing in three Italian newspapers aligned with different political areas (*Il Foglio*, aligned with the liberal-conservative area; *Il Fatto Quotidiano* aligned with the Movimento 5 Stelle, and *La Repubblica*, aligned with the center-left) the authors show a substantial gap in the use of the “climate change” term when referring to the floods, depending on the political orientation of the newspaper.

Moreover, they report substantial differences in the politicians' attributions of the causes of the floods. In particular, left-wing parties were more likely to explain the floods in *Emilia-Romagna* through climate change, while right-wing parties assign higher relevance to prevention and land management. These results are consistent with other findings showing the differentiated attribution of the main cause of the Emilia-Romagna floods in public opinion, depending on ideology and party preferences (Biancalana and Ladini 2024). In other words, there are signs of polarization over climate change in the causes of the floods.

Finally, by analyzing public opinion, Cabeza, Ronchi and Sallabera (2023) respond to a recent call for research on public support for climate policies (Fairbrother 2022), by providing unique evidence on Italians' preferences toward a set of policies. In line with extant international research (Rhodes, Axsen and Jaccard 2017), they show that the carbon tax is the least preferred policy, and in general tax policies are the least favored among the public while subsidies are by far the most popular instruments. This paper also provides original evidence on the role of political orientation in influencing attitudes toward climate policies in the Italian context. Nonetheless, there is no evidence of polarization among the public, as differences between people with different ideological

orientations are limited and unremarkable for certain policies, such as subsidies. This is not true only for support for investment in nuclear power plants, a traditionally polarizing issue. However, as the authors argue, the nuclear issue was highly politicized in the Italian public and political area long before the climate crisis gained relevance.

These findings indirectly suggest a low level of politicization of climate policies in Italy. Nonetheless, Cabeza, Ronchi and Sallabera show the remarkable role of the economic dimension of political ideology, namely citizens' positions on state intervention in the economy, in explaining public support for climate policies, outweighing the role of the cultural dimension of political ideology. Moreover, perceived economic conditions and geographical factors are less relevant than political attitudes in explaining public support for climate policies.

As we have argued, the overall picture shows limited signals of polarization in the Italian context, but the empirical evidence is variegated. Of course, there are no findings supporting convergence on the climate change issue between different actors.

4. Conclusions: A partial politicization of climate change in an evolving context

Previous research has found substantial heterogeneity in the politicization of climate change across European countries (Fisher 2022). This special issue aims to focus on a single context, the Italian one, in order to understand whether we can talk about a politicization of climate change. We already know that, differently from the US (McCright and Dunlap 2010, 2011), and other Anglo-Saxon countries (McKie 2018), the Italian context is not characterized by the presence of an organized denial countermovement. Moreover, Italy does not stand out in Europe for environmental and climate policies (Cotta and Domorenok 2022). However, in answering the question many pieces of the puzzle are missing.

In a previous contribution, Biancalana and Ladini (2022) proposed a research agenda for studying the climate change issue in Italy from the perspective of social and political research. The articles appearing in this special issue significantly contribute to the pursuit of such a research agenda, by showing original evidence regarding the climate change issue across several actors of the political system.

The empirical evidence from this special issue tends to support the conclusions recently drawn by Biancalana and Ladini (2024), who argue that we are observing a partial politicization of the climate change issue in Italy. Of course, there is rather consistent evidence of an increase in salience over time in the several spheres analyzed, and an expansion of actors involved. Also, there are some signals of polarization and, consistent with previous research, the climate change issue largely appears as positional. Nonetheless, the number of protests has substantially decreased in comparison with 2019, the approach of some actors tends to depoliticize the issue, and patterns of polarization are not unanimously detected. However, in light of the increasing manifest consequences of climate change, we can expect that the picture could evolve rapidly. Some signals in this direction could derive from increasing exposure to more intense extreme weather events, which can contribute to enhancing the level of politicization of climate change (Biancalana and Ladini 2024; Imperatore and Frazzetta in this special issue).

Although the special issue allows us to tackle several topics regarding different actors, there are some relevant aspects which are not sufficiently covered. For instance, a comprehensive study on the evolution of the coverage of climate change in various media outlets could contribute to the assessment of the politicization of the climate change issue at the media level. Also, while there is empirical evidence of an alignment between climate attitudes and party preferences (Bertolotti and Catellani 2023), future research should explore to what extent climate attitudes matter in explaining voting behavior. Recent research has found that the issue yield of the mitigation of climate change was not among the highest for any Italian party in the 2022 elections (De Sio, Maggini and Mannoni 2024). This result could affect party strategy in emphasizing climate change, and accordingly the role of climate attitudes in vote choice.

All in all, we can conclude that the climate change issue is partially politicized, but the evolving political, societal and environmental context points toward increasing politicization. Future research will allow for the consolidation and updating of evidence on the politicization of the climate issue, by accounting for the interplay of all the involved actors.

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